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TREE PLANTING IN THE PRAIRIE PLAINS AREA

Address by E. W. Tinker, Assistant Chief, U. S. Forest Service,  
on the National Farm and Home Hour, September 17, 1937

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Among the governmental undertakings arousing National interest and debate has been the tree planting program of the Forest Service in the Prairie-Plains region. Considerable misunderstanding has probably arisen because of lack of knowledge of the conditions and of new methods that have been developed in tree planting. I would like to bring you, as near as I can, a factual picture of this undertaking as a result of an inspection of the project, extending from North Dakota to Texas.

No doubt newspaper comments and radio broadcasts have brought to most of you the conditions in the vast Prairie-Plains region of the United States that inspired consideration of a vast tree planting program to in part, at least, alleviate conditions there. This area, generally known as the Nation's bread basket, is of more than local concern. It is, in fact one of the cornerstones of our national prosperity and well-being. Year after year of drought, grasshopper infestations and unrelenting hot weather, have taken a terrific toll from one of the most fertile and productive areas in the United States. Recently each dry season and every strong wind has moved the so-called "dust-bowl" further east and has depleted the invaluable top soil that produces such a large proportion of the food supply of the Nation. The western desert is on the march east and the tree planting program instigated by the Government appears to offer one effective barrier to protect the remaining fertile lands.

First, let me assure you that trees can be planted within this area and planted successfully if proper methods are used. The results of the work of the Forest Service there to date clearly prove this point. The survival of trees planted has been remarkably high. Over 20,000,000 trees were set out during the fall of 1936 and spring of 1937. Last reports indicate nearly 90% were alive and growing. The growth of the trees planted to date has been truly remarkable. Some of them are now over 20 feet tall, having grown to that height in three years from eighteen-inch seedlings set out in the field.

This project was undertaken by the Forest Service only after many years of research and experimentation. All of the skill of trained foresters has been brought to bear in assuring its success, which now is beyond question.

The present basis for the project differs materially from the general public conception. As a matter of fact, the entire project is based upon a high degree of cooperation from the farm owners. Generally they are required to furnish the land, material for fencing, and to carry on the necessary cultivation operations. To a large extent, the Federal Government participates in raising and properly planting the trees, assuring that proper methods are used and proper species planted to conform with soil and climatic conditions.

Where the work is under way, tree planting is rapidly becoming accepted by the farmers in the territory as a desirable thing to do, with the result that not only are their own farms protected but the farms of their neighbors as

well.

It was a strange sight for me to see, in largely a treeless country, the planted rows of trees already furnishing nesting places for birds, formerly almost totally absent. This, in itself, is no small consideration in the control of insect infestations. It was interesting to walk between the rows of trees in this semi-arid region and note the condition of the soil under the forest canopy. Many years back, in individual cases, farmers with a European background and an understanding of the value of shelterbelts, had provided the essential windbreaks for their farms, with very material effect. In one instance, where a tree planting program had been instigated, farmers' crops were thrifty and growing, while a neighbor without strips of trees, was replanting his fields for the third time, working in a cloud of dust. The first two plantings had been blown out of the ground because there was nothing to break the force of the wind.

The Forest Service is conducting research to determine the effect of these belts of trees on wind movement and the movement of soils, but anyone traveling as I have done over these States and observing conditions, can not avoid the conclusion, based upon common sense and general observations, that this undertaking would go far in meeting the problem of excessive evaporation caused by high winds and materially lessen the probabilities of dust storms and the destruction of fertile fields from wind erosion.

Disregarding the beneficial effects of this tree planting program from the standpoint of wind erosion, casting aside its beneficial effects from the standpoint of bird life, and leaving out of consideration the value of the wood produced for fence posts and fuel in an essentially treeless region, the project must still be considered from the standpoint of making this vast territory more livable for the people who live there. There is keen appreciation by the farmers in this territory of the value of trees in improving their environment. There is keen appreciation of the beauty of a forest cover and the psychological effect of this beauty upon the lives and well-being of the people.

This undertaking roots deeply into the very fundamentals of our governmental policy in making this a good land to live in - not only a land of plenty but a land offering a decent environment for human beings. It calls for a breadth of view on the part of the people of the United States that will endorse the improvement of a part for the benefit of the whole. The Federal Forest Service today stands committed to the project and gives every assurance of its success as a public undertaking if carried to completion.

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